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Leaking policies

President Reagan announced last week that leaks of classified information constitute "a problem of major proportions within the US government." The President ordered a crack-down on all official contacts with the media and also threatened officials who had access to leaked information with "investigation, to include all legal methods." A White House spokesman refused to rule out wiretaps.

The curious thing about this outburst is that this Administration has been unusually disciplined in managing the release of information. Until recently, there was little of the high-level bureaucratic infighting that leads to leaks from departmental officials trying to influence the outcome of a policy debate. Even the \$180 billion defense package revealed in October was kept under total wraps until it was announced.

Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger said last week the Administration is trying to protect "information that's of value to the nation and should not be disclosed." The directive was aimed particularly at sources in the Departments of State and Defense and the intelligence agencies.

The gag order is not aimed at protecting secrets of military importance. Such information - codes, locations of forces, names of agents, specifications of hardware, details of operations - is rarely leaked. The last memorable flap over militarily sensitive revelations concerned "stealth bomber" technology. That occurred during the Carter Administration and was generally attributed to the White House itself. (The idea was to show that Jimmy Carter, accused of being "soft" on defense because he had canceled the B-1 bomber, had something better in the works.)

Without the nuisance of unauthorized leaks, an administration finds it easier to sell policies if critics don't have details with which to sound an alarm or buttress arguments. The greater the worries about political support in Congress, the greater the desire to control all information that could be a factor in domestic politics.

The Administration now seems to believe that it is about to find itself in dubious battle over national security issues. The gag order amounts to digging foxholes and stringing barbed wire along a defense perimeter. The goal is to keep informed critics out of certain politically restricted areas.

Clandestine activities in Central America - especially covert CIA efforts to "destabilize" the government of Nicaragua - are the kinds of activities the Administration is rightly worried about. Agents of the deposed Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza are training illegally in camps in Florida and California, moving over to Honduras, and from there launching border attacks against Nicaragua.

CIA involvement is evident but details are not yet fully known. The public has not yet awakened to the resemblance of these operations to past episodes, such as the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco, or the overthrow of an elected, democratic government in Guatemala in 1954.

Apart from CIA involvement, the activities of the exile groups are arguably illegal under the Neutrality Act of 1794, which forbids efforts to overthrow foreign governments with which the United States is not at war. News leaks that aroused public awareness of these clandestine activities would hinder Administration plans.

The military budget is another area which may be acutely embarrassing to the Administration when the facts are known. Top Pentagon officials were actually given lie detector tests last week in an effort to discover how news of the expected \$750 billion overrun reached the press.

President Reagan projected confidence when he took office. His Administration had no need to be furtive as long as that confidence remained. Now, however, the Reagan team appears to be moving in directions with more political risk. That a well-informed public is regarded as a hindrance tells us more about these Reagan policies than an ocean of leaks ever could.